

The Need for Audience-Reaction Studies in Information
at Iowa State

W. J. Ruffner

The general picture -- There is a growing awareness in this age of publics for better and more accurate techniques to learn and evaluate public responses to information. Organizations which use the press, radio, and films for adult education, advertising, or general publicity, are more and more concerned about what happens to the information they disseminate.

The special need at Iowa State -- It is especially important for an institution such as Iowa State College, which is now spending more than \$225,000 annually on various forms of information for off-campus education, to learn what happens to bulletins, broadcasts, and press releases -- how they are used -- how they alter or fail to alter attitudes -- what devices are most effective for reaching the Iowa public, particularly the Iowa farm public.

A typical problem -- Iowa State needs to know, for instance, whether a publication such as FARM SCIENCE, distributed to 18,000 farmers each month, at an annual cost of \$11,000 is doing the job the college wants done. Is this publication sufficiently useful to take it on a subscription basis? Or, is it wiser to try to reach all farmers with a different publication a number of times each year?

"Shots in the dark" -- Necessarily much of the Iowa State off-campus information and educational work, while done according to accepted practice and procedure, is none-the-less a series of "shots in the dark". We "think" a certain device is good. It may or may not be effective circulation, and listener or reader comment seems to be our chief checking device. Some systematic method of measuring information results will remove a lot of guesswork, and by so doing, should save a lot of money.

Other media -- Farm magazines, newspapers, and radio stations are asking the same questions as the college. Many of them are spending money in an effort to get the answers. Most of them, we believe, are willing to cooperate with any study Iowa State might undertake to secure these answers.

Other schools -- Other schools, notably the University of Minnesota and the University of Iowa are now ahead of Iowa State in conducting audience survey studies, particularly in connection with newspapers and reader reactions, and to some extent with radio listening.

The long view -- In a broader sense and from a longer prospective, it is certainly a wise move for a technical institution such as Iowa State College, which is supported by public monies and dependent on a layman's legislature and a lay citizenry, to have constant knowledge of prevailing public attitudes toward the college and college activities. A continuing audience survey, based on proper sampling and personal interviews could provide valuable information to the Iowa State administration.

A valid survey -- There is a need for basic knowledge and methodology to which the college can respond for truly valid and reliable survey information and survey methods in the field of audience research. Scores, if not hundreds of surveys are now being conducted each year by many commercial organizations. The fact that many commercial and industrial organizations are turning to Iowa State to take advantage of the "master-sample" design is indicative both of their interest in surveys and their need for better survey methods.

A good many of the commercial surveys now in progress are faulty in one or more of three essential survey requisites -- (1) a properly designed sample, (2) a properly designed interview, and (3) a psychologically-trained interviewer. The Iowa State Statistical Laboratory is already functioning in every area except that of the

psychologically-trained interviewer. A proposal for a "Surveys Branch" is already before the Iowa State administration. Meanwhile, it is necessary in order to conduct current college surveys such as the one on "Livestock Morbidity" to hire commercial interviewers for single projects at rates much in excess of what a permanent Iowa State employed and administered field force would cost. Such a field force could be permanently on call for many survey-interview duties.

2. A Workable Plan for Audience-Reaction Studies at Iowa State College

- A. Facilities -- A continuing series of audience-reaction studies could readily be designed and administered through the present resources of the Iowa State Statistical Laboratory. (1) To completely carry on studies such as those indicated in #1, would require the addition of a "surveys crew" or a group of psychologically-trained interviewers. This would constitute a permanent "field force" to enable Iowa State to do its own interviewing rather than "contracting out" the interview portion of the survey job as now. (2) A memorandum describing the details and requirements of such a force for this and other projects, not involved in the present discussion, has already been forwarded to the administration by Mr. Arnold King.
- B. Direction -- The newly-formed "Information Committee" could undertake direction of the studies. (1) The areas and media to be studied and the order in which the studies might be pursued would be left to the discretion of the committee. (2) An initial project might well be a study of the magazine, FARM SCIENCE, and a personal-interview check survey on the recent WOI mail survey of farm audience. (3) This committee, representing press, radio, bulletin, and visual aids, would be guided by Mr. Arnold King, who would act as consultant.
- C. Planning -- Essentially the committee would be "nuclear" -- then depending on the area involved -- press, radio, or bulletin -- (1) additional representatives from commercial publications, radio stations, and film producers, would be called in. Wallace's Farmer and Successful Farming would be represented as would be the Des Moines Register & Tribune, the Mason City Globe Gazette, and broadcasting stations, WHO and WMT.
- D. Length of study -- We feel an audience-reaction study of the kind described should actually be a continuing series of studies. (1) Studies should probably be on a quarterly basis with a different area in the press, radio, bulletin, or visual aids fields to be surveyed each time, and over a minimum of 3 years. (a) Continuity for the sake of comparison is one of the vital elements of such a study.
- E. Cost -- We estimate a reasonable expenditure for such a series of studies would amount to \$12,000 a year over a 3-year period. (1) Since the direction of the studies would be an "Information Committee function", and the administration, a "Statistical Laboratory function", the funds should logically be assigned to the "Statistical Laboratory". (a) This annual figure represents approximately 5% of the total annual information expenditure.

3. Some Factors To Be Considered In the Proposed Audience-
Reaction Studies

Benefits

- A. Accurate appraisal -- measurement and evaluation of information campaigns, programs, and projects will be possible on a regular basis.
- B. Economy -- a money saving should be possible in informational activities by adapting better practices and discarding ineffective ones where so indicated.
- C. Efficiency -- with a better understanding of successful and unsuccessful information techniques, a more effective use of press, radio, and visual aids should be possible.
- D. Basic information -- a great deal of basic research information valuable academically as well as operationally should result.
- E. Prestige -- Iowa State can well lead the field, with available facilities, in terms of farm audience-reaction studies.
- F. Good will -- Iowa State can further enlist the good will and cooperation of commercial information people by cooperating with them in such studies and making results available to them.
- G. Administrative -- Iowa State, by an accurate understanding of prevailing public attitudes toward the college and college activities, can make certain decisions more easily and on a more definite basis.

Difficulties

- A. Cost -- while the proposed annual budget for such a series of studies is a relatively nominal figure in terms of total college operation, cheaper forms of surveys, such as mail survey, or county-agent interview, might be suggested. The best prevailing statistical opinion holds that forms of survey other than controlled personal interview are of comparatively little value.
- B. Competition -- with a college survey crew in operation, the question of college competition in the industrial survey field might be raised as an objection by some commercial operators. This is not a valid objection, nor does it apply to the studies themselves. In any case, the answers to such criticism are simple and to the point:
 - (1) Iowa State will be doing basic research and pilot studies.
 - (2) Basic research results will be available to all interested parties.
 - (3) The studies will probably be cooperative in nature, with commercial informational organizations participating.
 - (4) If survey jobs are done for groups other than Iowa State, the first three factors will still apply, and the job will be done on a cost basis.

Scanned from the National Association of Educational Broadcasters Records
at the Wisconsin Historical Society as part of
"Unlocking the Airwaves: Revitalizing an Early Public and Educational Radio Collection."



A collaboration among the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities,
University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Communication Arts,
and Wisconsin Historical Society.

Supported by a Humanities Collections and Reference Resources grant from
the National Endowment for the Humanities



WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY



WISCONSIN
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication/collection do not necessarily reflect those of the
National Endowment for the Humanities.